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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 CARACAS 001117

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SUBJECT: PEACEFUL PROTESTS CONTINUE, GLOBOVISION ON TRIAL

CARACAS 00001117 001.2 OF 002

Classified By: POLITICAL COUNSELOR ROBERT DOWNES
FOR REASON 1.4 (D)

¶1. (C) Summary. Ten days after the closure of Radio Caracas Television (RCTV), university students continue to protest peacefully in support of the network and freedom of expression. Thousands of university students marched June 6 to the Attorney General's office, making it the largest pro-RCTV student-led march to date. In response to the students' petition, the National Assembly (NA) is organizing a June 7 debate among students for and against RCTV's closure. Separately, the director general of Globovision, Alberto Federico Ravell, appeared before the Attorney General's office to confront allegations that the network broadcast subliminal messages inciting viewers to assassinate President Chavez. The BRV is sending pro-RCTV student leaders mixed messages. While the NA and other BRV officials are making overtures of dialogue, Chavez continues to repudiate the ongoing demonstrations as U.S.-driven efforts to topple him.

Largest student-led demonstration

¶12. (SBU) Over 10,000 university students participated June 6, in the largest student-led demonstration in support of RCTV. Students and RCTV supporters marched from the Central University of Venezuela's (UCV's) campus to the Attorney General's office to deliver a document demanding that the state guarantee freedom of expression and respect university autonomy. The gathering, originally scheduled for June 5, was postponed until a valid permit was issued. University students from Carabobo, Aragua, and Zulia states planned to attend the demonstration, although the local media reports that the National Guard temporarily blocked university buses departing from Maracay and Valencia.

¶13. (SBU) At the onset of the march, municipality officials and security forces prevented the protesters from marching. As has been the case in previous marches, the Chavista mayor of Libertador municipality, Freddy Bernal, alleged that the students had not requested a permit to march. UCV administrators responded, noting that student leaders requested a permit from Caracas Metropolitan mayor Jun Barreto. After some negotiation and with heavy police presence, the march ensued. Attorney General Isaias Rodriguez received the student's petition and exchanged points of view before the media.

The Great Debate

¶4. (SBU) The National Assembly (NA) is organizing a June 7 debate among students for and against RCTV's closure. Pro-RCTV protesters petitioned an open session with the NA June 1, a measure that was introduced formally by Podemos Deputy Ismael Garcia on June 5. Cilia Flores, President of the NA, said she agreed to arrange a debate with students because it appears they "have cut ties with (opposition) political parties, and with violent sectors" that wish to destabilize Venezuela. The format of the event, however, is not what student leaders had envisioned. The NA recently approved a request by "Bolivarian" (read pro-government) students to present their case as well, turning the event into a student debate. Some student leaders have objected, arguing that they wish to reply to the BRV's actions only.

Globovision on Trial

¶5. (U) Separately, the director general of local all-news cable network Globovision, Alberto Federico Ravell, was summoned June 6 to a hearing at the Attorney General's office following accusations by Minister of Popular Power for Communications William Lara that Globovision aired a video clip that incited viewers to kill President Chavez. Ravell addressed the media before and after his hearing, dismissing Lara's allegations and affirming that Globovision will not be cowed by BRV threats to close the station. Popular Globovision talk show host Leopoldo Castillo is scheduled to appear before the same office June 7.

Widespread protests continue

CARACAS 00001117 002.2 OF 002

¶6. (U) Peaceful student-led protests continue nationwide in support of RCTV and freedom of expression, most without incident.

-- Caracas university students protested silently on the public rail system June 5. Students placed tape over their mouths and carried signs that read "Metro ticket: 500 bolivares, liberty: priceless" and "Please excuse the inconvenience, democracy under construction," among others. Occasionally, students peeled off the tape to answer questions about upcoming demonstrations and their routes.

-- The National Guard reportedly repressed a peaceful June 5 gathering of students outside Rafael Belloso University in Maracaibo. The local press reports that between two and nine students were injured by rubber bullets, while dozens were affected by tear gas grenades. Several arrests were made, although it is not clear how many were taken in.

-- Students in Puerto Ordaz and Ciudad Guayana distributed approximately 3,000 flyers June 5 demanding that local authorities respect the rule of law and the right to protest.

-- In Carabobo, student participated in inter-collegiate debates on freedom of expression and the student movement.

-- Pro-RCTV supporters in Anzoategui marched to the Ombudsman's office and invited him to participate in upcoming student-led demonstrations.

-- Students in Maracay delivered a document to the Archbishop of Valencia, Reinaldo del Prette, requesting that the church issue a statement on recent events in Venezuela.

-- Several universities in Zulia state requested the local authorities release students arrested during previous demonstrations.

Comment

¶ 7. (C) The BRV is sending mixed messages to pro-RCTV student protesters. On the one hand, the National Assembly's (NA's) willingness to meet with student leaders is a notably shift away the confrontational stance deputies expressed recently. Flores' tactic of denying pro-RCTV students a platform by turning the NA appearance into a debate with "Bolivarian" students is designed to cut into the pro-RCTV side's air time and create the misleading impression that students are evenly divided on the RCTV issue. On the other hand, Chavez and others continue with their veiled exhortations to violence. Additionally, Chavez continues to discredit student protests as U.S.-sponsored effort to topple him.

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